

REPRINTED
WITH
PERMISSION

The New York Times

Escape

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2006

AMERICAN JOURNEYS | *The Mall of America*

In Minnesota, A Mall as Big as All Indoors



Photographs by Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times

AMUSEMENT *Park at MOA and, right, Legos at Mall of America.*

By LOUISE TUTELIAN

AT the Mall of America, you need a good pair of sneakers and a plan. You don't want to go astray between the simulated driving at the Nascar Silicon Motor Speedway and the real shopping at Nordstrom's. Or lose your way between Urban Outfitters and the Underwater Adventures Aquarium. And with more than four miles of aisles, comfortable footwear is essential. Brought the wrong shoes? No problem: There are eight sneaker shops.

Since it opened in 1992, the Mall of America, in the Minneapolis suburbs,

has been claiming to be the mall for the entire country. What's amazing is how well it lives up to its billing. It contains all the standard mall stores (and sometimes three or four of the same one) like Ann Taylor, Abercrombie, Victoria's Secret and Sephora — 520 in all. It also has, in addition to a speedway and an aquarium, a seven-acre indoor amusement park called the Park at MOA, 86 places to get something to eat, a big Lego Imagination Center play area, a day spa, a recreational oxygen bar, a post office and a wedding chapel.

But it's the shopping that draws 40 million people a year, from around the world

and around the corner. Girlfriends celebrating "big" birthdays fly in for buying sprees. Far-flung families hold reunions with shopping on the side. Parents with toddlers switch off between amusement park rides and forays to the stores. Most international customers come from Britain, Japan and Scandinavia.

Aldis Gunnarsdottir, 47, sat on a bench one recent Saturday morning, poring over a glossy map of the mall spread wide across her lap. Pen in hand, her blond bob falling forward, Ms. Gunnarsdottir, who had flown in from her home in Reykjavik, Iceland, to shop, traced the route she would follow through 57 acres

of retail wonderland.

Her mission was to buy as much clothing, shoes, sports equipment and fitness wear as possible in the next three days, and, she said, it was well worth the six-hour flight each way at \$659 round trip. "We have 24 percent sales tax on clothes in Iceland," she said. Minnesota has none. "With sales, I end up saving about 50 percent."

In the next few weeks, mallgoers will find holiday extras like the World's Largest Gingerbread House (completely edible, though no one will actually eat it) and holiday-themed events in the Rotunda, a circular performance space. This Sunday, the Southern chef Paula Deen will sign her seasonal cookbook, and on Monday, the Minnesota Vikings cheerleaders will perform a two-hour holiday variety show.

Set amid flat nondescript acres of industrial park, power plants and airplane hangars, the mall is the main attraction in its home city of Bloomington. Its site was once occupied by Metropolitan Stadium, home of the Vikings and the Twins. After the stadium was replaced by the Metrodome in Minneapolis in 1982, Bloomington looked for a lucrative new use for the land — and found it. Now the Mall of America generates more than \$1.8 billion annually. Like a retail terrarium, it has everything visitors need to thrive, rest and refuel, including hourly child care and dozens of restrooms. Its miles of marble, tile, brass, chrome and glass are polished and trash-free. And the weather is 70 degrees all day, every day.

Once you've picked up a map at any entrance (or online before arriving, at www.mallofamerica.com), the mall is surprisingly easy to negotiate — compared with a dizzying Disney park or any Las Vegas casino, it's a snap.



COME ON IN *The mall, near Minneapolis, draws 40 million a year.*

The amusement park is in the center with four retail avenues surrounding it, each the size of a typical mall, with its own food court and design theme: a park with trees and lampposts, a train station with crossing bridges, a chic thoroughfare for high-end shops, and a black-and-chrome contemporary street for young shoppers. Skylights, kiosks and thousands of live trees and plants make the mall a pleasant place to wander, even if most of the stores are as familiar as your front door and the perfume of Cinnabon, Starbucks and scented candles is the same inhaled in malls everywhere.

Visitors should scout out the few Minnesota-bred retailers, including Local Charm, featuring regional jewelry-mak-

ers, and Lake Wobegon USA, which pays homage to Garrison Keillor and all things Minnesotan. Similarly, when it's time to refuel, forgo the food court and seek out Famous Dave's, a hokey local favorite featuring smoky barbecued ribs, chicken and brisket. The biggest meal on the menu is a feast for at least two served on a garbage can lid, and napkins are a roll of paper towels on a stand made of random plumbing parts. Tucci Benucch, with a Tuscan villa theme, is a higher-end choice, but even at the best restaurants in the mall, diners must be prepared for sippy cups and strollers sharing space with fine wines and glass goblets.

The particular Midwestern charm of this region, often referred to as "Minneso-

IF YOU GO

THE Mall of America (www.mallofamerica.com) is in Bloomington, Minn., a mile and a half from the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport. Dozens of chain hotels offer regular shuttle service to and from the mall and airport; renting a car is unnecessary. (Downtown Minneapolis is nine miles from the mall by light rail.)

With its 70,000-square-foot indoor water park, the Grand Lodge Hotel (1700 American Boulevard East, Bloomington; 877-757-5433; www.grandlodgemn.com) may provide the bribe parents need after a day of shopping. Its 403 rooms start at \$149 and usually come with water park tickets.

The Hilton Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport-Mall of America (3800 American Boulevard East, Bloomington; 952-

854-2100; www.hilton.com) is a completely renovated 300-room full-service hotel adjacent to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, with hundreds of miles of trails. Rooms from \$151.

In the mall, Famous Dave's (952-854-0225) serves a four-bone order of ribs with two sides for \$11.59 (six bones is \$15.29). For a more luxurious reward for surviving a day of marathon shopping, go upscale at Tucci Benucch (952-853-0200); entrees are \$10 to \$23.

The Timberland Twister and the Pepsi Ripsaw Roller Coaster are 2 of 30 rides at the Park at MOA (www.theparkatmoa.com), a seven-acre indoor amusement park now decked with 350,000 holiday lights.

The World's Largest Gingerbread House, 60 feet tall and made of real gingerbread, candy and nearly 5,000

pounds of icing, is an attempt by Roger Pelcher, a gingerbread artist, to break his own Guinness world record. The house will be open for tours starting next Friday.

Underwater Adventures Aquarium (www.sharky.tv; \$13.95, \$9.95 for ages 3 to 12), the mall's 1.2-million-gallon underground aquarium, has four exhibits. In one, the Tunnel, visitors walk through a plexiglass tube, surrounded by 100 sharks and 4,500 sea creatures.

The best spot to drop the shopping and catch the big game, mall insiders say, is in the back of the Sports Grill above the Stadium Club in the Park at MOA, where there are leather club chairs, a big-screen TV, burgers and beer on tap. The best place to take a breather is on the leafy terrace outside the California Cafe, overlooking the Park at MOA.

ta Nice,” is on display all over the mall. Salespeople helpfully fetch a different size. Parents patiently line up at amusement park rides. Counter clerks make small talk while filling an order. Mall employees seem to have a mandate to make the experience fun, or at least painless. No one seems to be in a rush.

Page Berkholz, 33, was cheerfully organizing supplies at his face-painting station in the Park at MOA, prepping for the approximately 30 cheeks he decorates daily. “I see kids from all over the country and abroad here,” said Mr. Berkholz, an art major at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul. “This place really is quite the melting pot.”

Rides at the park, which is meant to resemble an enchanted forest with faux cobblestone, rough-hewn timber benches and full-grown live trees, range from the lost-in-time Americana Carousel to the terrifying Timberland Twister roller coaster. One afternoon, a dozen grade-schoolers tumbled inside a four-story inflatable treehouse as strobe lights flashed and the sound system blared “It’s Raining Men.”

Fifty members of the Galvin family of Chicago were resting on picnic benches nearby, wearing vivid purple T-shirts bearing their name. They had chosen the Mall of America for their reunion because “there was something for everyone to do here,” a tiny Galvin named Rita Lloyd said as her grandson Quincy, 18, towered over her.



IN another part of the mall, Ashley Rollison, 20, of Mound, Minn., was unpacking a bouquet on a bench outside the Chapel of Love in preparation for her impending wedding. Ms. Rollison, 20, said her decision to marry in a mall was simple: “I’m a girl, and it’s the Mall of America.” Trailed by a handful of family members, Ms. Rollison, in a rhinestone-sprinkled tulle gown with spaghetti straps and a shoulder-length veil, trod carefully into the simple white chapel near Bloomingdale’s.

By late afternoon, most of the mall was in full cry. Wails of hunger and fatigue and the occasional random shriek could be heard on every level — and the children

were starting to fall apart, too. Chairs and benches were filled with men of varying ages, all with the same thousand-yard stare. Cold Stone Creamery was overrun with shoppers whose blood sugar levels were getting low, and there were lines at all four Caribou Coffee shops.

Rick Dwyer, 38, an electrician from Madison, Wis., was slumped against a railing outside the B Sweet candy store, having driven five hours the night before. His daughters McKenna, 5, and Halligan, 7, lounged on his lap while his wife, Tanya, 34, enjoyed some retail therapy. “I come for the people-watching,” he said as McKenna galloped a stuffed pink poodle over his knees. “A fully dressed ape just jumped off the glass elevator and a lot of people screamed, so that was fun.”

Outside, hotel shuttle vans were filling up, ready to transport visitors back to some of the 35 hotels within five miles of the mall. Many of the 12,550 parking spaces were empty. But some visitors weren’t ready to call it a day. Morris Steckman, an employee of the Rapid City, S.D., school district, and his wife, Deanna, a social worker, had driven 10 hours to spend time at the mall. They planned to window-shop and stroll, eat and maybe see a movie (the AMC on the top level has 14 screens). Buying stuff? On this point, the Steckmans appeared to represent a Mall of America anomaly.

“Oh, we’re not shoppers,” Mr. Steckman said. “We only buy off the Internet.”